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Chair: Mr. Ramírez Carreño (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela)

Contents

Agenda item 53: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

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The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

Agenda item 53: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (A/72/13/Rev.1, A/72/313, A/72/326, A/72/332 and A/72/334)

1. **The Chair** said that, for years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had been at the forefront in responding to the protracted situation of Palestine refugees, who accounted for approximately 25 per cent of refugees worldwide. Regrettably, the call for sufficient resources to be provided to United Nations agencies, such as UNRWA, contained in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, had still not been answered one year later. At present, the Agency was facing a funding shortfall of some $77 million, which jeopardized its ability to provide its core services.

2. Hosts, donors and supporters should be proud of the Agency's achievements. The Agency's staff of 30,000 had made a remarkable contribution to human development in the Middle East, from the eradication of communicable diseases, such as polio and tuberculosis, to universal enrolment and literacy for refugee children in UNRWA schools. Amid conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, repeated surges of violence and the ongoing blockade in Gaza, the Agency continued to implement humanitarian and development programmes which had helped many Palestine refugees to escape poverty. The Agency had also been invaluable in providing a sense of hope and dignity to that vulnerable community, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight in accordance with United Nations resolutions. However, the Agency's accomplishments should not be taken for granted. It worked in one of the most polarized and conflict-affected regions of the world and had been the first responder in five wars over the previous decade alone, losing 30 staff members since 2011.

3. The year 2017 had been a landmark year for UNRWA engagement with Member States. The Report of the Secretary-General on UNRWA operations (A/71/849) underlined the indispensable role that the Agency played in the region and re-emphasized the fundamental responsibility of all stakeholders to ensure the security and stability of the millions of Palestine refugees that the Agency served. The Report also set out a series of measures to ensure that the Agency's funding was sufficient, predictable and sustained for the duration of its mandate. He hoped that the success of that process could be built upon, including through the establishment of an endowment fund with the Islamic Development Bank and a trust fund with the World Bank.

4. The real tragedy was that no political solution had been found to the underlying conflict. The parties to the conflict should be pressed to find such a solution, which was long overdue. Meanwhile, he urged the international community to support the Agency and its vital work on behalf of Palestine refugees.

Statement by the Commissioner-General of UNRWA

5. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that the mobilization of diplomatic and political support for UNRWA in 2017 had allowed crucial milestones to be reached. The Secretary-General had responded swiftly to the General Assembly's request, contained in its resolution 71/93, for him to facilitate broad consultations aimed at securing sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for UNRWA. Held in March 2017, those consultations had served to deepen engagement among close partners, members of the UNRWA Advisory Commission and Member States.

6. In June 2017, Palestinians had marked 50 years of Israeli occupation. During each of his visits to the Agency's field of operations, he had witnessed the despair, uncertainty and anxiety, as well as the profound and far-reaching expectations, of Palestine refugees. The international community could not remain indifferent to the impact of the Israeli occupation on the lives of individual refugees in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. It must ensure that their plight was not forgotten amid numerous armed conflicts and crises and that the rights of Palestine refugees were duly protected. In the Gaza Strip, a blockade lasting 10 years had led to some of the highest unemployment rates in the world and to electricity and water shortages. With the exception of a small number who were permitted to travel, the 2 million people living in the Gaza Strip, 1.3 million of whom were refugees, were unable to leave the territory, even to seek medical treatment. For too long the political inaction of the international community had prolonged the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

7. As the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic entered its seventh year, the international community could not remain indifferent to the cataclysm that had been raging since 2011, which had splintered the once close-knit Palestine refugee community. The heart of the Palestine refugee community in Yarmouk had been devastated by five years of ruthless urban combat against a range of non-State armed groups, including Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Syrian governmental forces. Throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, the majority of Palestine refugees had been displaced. Some 120,000 had left the country, victims of the second largest cross-

border displacement of Palestine refugees since 1948. While a small number of internally displaced refugees were trying to return to the camps or their homes, the conflict continued to rage and there were no guarantees of safety. In addition, 95 per cent of the 440,000 Palestine refugees remaining in the Syrian Arab Republic, most of whom had been robbed of their livelihood, depended on UNRWA to survive.

8. In Lebanon, Palestine refugees were denied almost all economic and social opportunities outside the camps and experienced one of the highest poverty rates in the region. Refugees lived in overcrowded camps where criminality and factional fighting were on the rise. Nothing was more important than creating a new political horizon for Palestine refugees. While he welcomed the ongoing dialogue between Palestinian parties aimed at bringing about reconciliation, 70 years after the 1948 Palestinian exodus, only a comprehensive political process, such as that called for by the Secretary-General, could bring peace to the region.

9. However, against that backdrop of severe hardship, the Agency had continued to operate and achieve results. The 515,000 children enrolled in its basic education programme were being equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead productive lives. Following the overhaul of its primary health-care system, the Agency had introduced the concept of a family doctor, ended the practice of issuing mass antibiotic prescriptions and had begun providing mental health-care services alongside physical health-care services in the Gaza Strip. Sustaining the Agency's achievements was both a priority and a serious challenge. The Agency needed to improve the quality of its services and meet growing needs while containing rising costs. To that end, over the previous two years, the Agency had made transformative changes in the areas of programming, management, support and delivery. Despite having set out key reforms in its medium-term strategy for 2016–2021, the Agency had decided to implement some of the most difficult changes during the first six months of 2016, which had met with political and community resistance. For example, in Spring 2016, the Agency had transitioned from bulk food distribution to issuing e-cards and cash vouchers in Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank. In Lebanon, the Agency had adjusted its hospitalization subsidy to ensure greater consistency, sustainability and coverage for the most vulnerable refugees. In 2017, the Agency would begin reforming its microfinance programme to expand the number and type of loans available and to broaden its client base. The Agency's decision to overhaul its approach to medical procurement in 2016 had resulted in significant savings and had enabled it to prescribe statins to Palestine refugees, for whom heart disease was the leading cause of death. If the Agency had not undertaken such reforms in 2015 and 2016, it would have required an additional $81 million in 2017. To have avoided that situation was no small achievement.

10. The Agency faced specific challenges as it operated in an unstable, politically complex landscape. One such challenge was the vulnerability of its locally recruited staff who often served on the front line. Since 2010, 30 Palestinian staff had lost their lives to the violence in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Gaza Strip. Recalling that Palestinian staff were excluded from the United Nations security management umbrella, he said that the Agency had established a security risk management department and had rolled out new procedures in the field to mitigate the risks that they faced. Neutrality, which was a precondition for fulfilling the Agency's mandate and for preserving its reputation, was another serious challenge. The Agency had implemented policies and protocols to prevent, detect and address breaches of the principle of neutrality. In 2017, an internal investigation had revealed that two staff members had been elected to positions within Hamas, which had resulted in their dismissal. Following the discovery of tunnels under two UNRWA schools, which had subsequently been sealed, the Agency had unreservedly condemned Hamas in a public statement. The Agency would not allow the integrity of its operations, the safety of students and staff or stakeholder trust to be undermined in such a way.

11. In response to the Secretary-General's funding recommendations, remarkable progress had been made towards establishing a trust fund with the World Bank and an Islamic endowment fund with the Islamic Development Bank to support Palestine refugees. Despite having the broad support of Member States, the Agency had been unable to secure a more equitable share of the United Nations regular budget and action would need to be taken on other fronts to make UNRWA more financially stable. The Agency would continue to diversify its voluntary donor base and was actively pursuing partnerships with private and public contributors. While the progress made towards achieving improved financial stability for UNRWA was encouraging, the Agency nonetheless faced a critical shortfall of $77 million in its programme budget, which threatened to interrupt the delivery of core services to refugees. Unless that funding gap was bridged quickly, in less than two weeks, critical decisions about which programmes to suspend would have to be taken. Despite the Agency having provided the region with a measure of stability and having contributed to one of the most

successful human development dynamics in the Middle East through its schools and clinics, it was once again on the verge of a major funding breakdown, and urgent collective action was needed to prevent a dramatic crisis from unfolding. UNRWA did not take the support of its partners for granted and, by the same token, the thousands of UNRWA staff who continued to risk their lives to assist refugees in conflict situations should not be taken for granted by its partners. The international community had a duty to safeguard the access of Palestine refugee children to education and to keep UNRWA schools open and active.

Interactive dialogue

12. **Ms. Yalçın** (Turkey) said that 2017 had been a landmark year in the common search for a sustainable solution to the Agency's budget deficit. One recommendation that had loomed large in the Report of the Secretary-General on the operations of UNRWA (A/71/849) related to the establishment of a trust fund with the World Bank and an endowment fund with the Islamic Development Bank. Recalling that Turkey had already contributed to the latter, she asked what progress had been made in establishing those funds and how Member States could help to make them a reality.

13. **Ms. Meitzad** (Israel), reaffirming her Government's continued support for the Agency's humanitarian activities, said she had been struck by the fact that, in its overview of the situation in the Gaza Strip, the Commissioner-General's report (A/72/13) did not refer to Hamas, the internationally recognized terrorist organization that had controlled the Gaza Strip for over a decade, by name, referring to it merely as the de facto authority in Gaza, and that it essentially neglected to mention the responsibility that the organization bore for the current situation in the territory. The decision to make only scant reference to Hamas in the report raised serious questions over the Agency's credibility. If that oversight was attributable to a lack of information on the human rights violations committed by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Agency might refer to the report of the United Nations country team entitled "Gaza Ten Years Later", published in July 2017, which stated that, upon seizing control of Gaza, Hamas had increasingly tightened its grip on power, including by executing, maiming and jailing opponents and suppressing dissent and that a further impediment to access and movement had been the military build-up in Gaza by Hamas and other militant groups, which had continued and intensified over the past decade, including the development, stockpiling and firing of rockets capable of reaching deep into Israel and the construction of sophisticated tunnels used for kidnappings and terrorist attacks in Israel. The Commissioner-General should explain the decision to make effectively no mention of Hamas in his report. She asked whether he considered Hamas to have become irrelevant to the discussion on the situation in the Gaza Strip.

14. In 2016, Israel had drawn the Agency's attention to the appointment of two UNRWA staff members to the so-called Hamas political bureau. There was no doubt that its so-called political bureau was involved in the organization's militant and terrorist activities. The appointment of those individuals to that body constituted a serious breach of the principle of neutrality and ought to have been mentioned in the Commissioner-General's report. UNRWA had a duty to bring to the attention of the General Assembly all instances of misconduct and violations by its staff of the principles of neutrality and impartiality in order to safeguard the transparency and efficient management of the Agency and its funding. The Agency should give such acts comprehensive coverage in its reports and take appropriate action to respond to them and to pre-empt their reoccurrence.

15. Hamas was also known to have built a network of underground tunnels to facilitate the conduct of its terrorist activities, which involved exploiting United Nations facilities and civilian infrastructure, often using innocent Gazans as human shields. Although the additional tunnels beneath UNRWA schools had only been discovered after the Commissioner-General's report had been published and had subsequently been sealed, the fact remained that such tunnels continued to pose an imminent threat to Israelis and Palestinians alike. The Commissioner-General should describe the measures taken to halt that practice and explain why the official press statement issued following the discovery of those tunnels did not explicitly condemn Hamas. Moreover, the Commissioner-General's report criticized the significant delays experienced in the approval of dual-use items and the costliness of the procedure while failing to take into account the security considerations that necessitated thorough monitoring in the first place. It was widely acknowledged that Hamas regularly blocked or diverted resources from reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip in order to dig tunnels, set up training camps and manufacture rockets. In 2016, the Israeli security forces had halted some 1,200 attempts to smuggle prohibited goods, such as drones, lasers and military equipment, into the Gaza Strip. In 2017, two Palestinian women travelling to Israel for medical treatment had been apprehended for attempting to smuggle explosives in their medical supplies. The decision to continue to ignore Israeli security concerns

and the threat posed by smuggling also called into question the credibility of the report. More generally, the decision to effectively overlook the role played by Hamas in the Gaza Strip conflict promoted a one-sided narrative and cast doubt over the Agency's impartiality.

16. **Mr. Elshandawily** (Egypt) said that Egypt, in its capacity as Chair of the UNRWA Advisory Commission, commended the Agency on its efforts to implement the medium-term strategy for the period 2016–2021, especially given the difficult conditions in the field and the challenges associated with mobilizing the necessary funding. It would, however, be useful to hear more about the main operational challenges and limitations impeding the effective implementation of the strategy and how the Agency intended to overcome those challenges. The Commissioner-General might also elaborate on the origin and mandate of the recently established security risk management department. Lastly, he asked how the literacy rate of Palestine refugee children compared to that of children in other countries at the same level of development.

17. **Mr. Bawazir** (Indonesia) said it was a tragedy that, after 50 years of occupation, there was still little prospect of an improvement in the situation in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, several United Nations agencies had warned against the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in the territory. The population of the Gaza Strip, which included Palestine refugees, continued to live under an illegal Israeli blockade and was forced to endure inferior socioeconomic conditions, food insecurity, severe shortages of medical supplies and an unemployment rate which was among one of the highest in the world. He asked how UNRWA planned to change the Gaza Strip's development trajectory for the better while responding to essential humanitarian needs and accelerating reconstruction efforts.

18. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that Palestine refugees and UNRWA faced immense challenges as persistent underfunding and unstable socioeconomic, humanitarian and security conditions continued to undermine the Agency's ability to meet refugee needs and cope with emergencies. However, in spite of those impediments, the Agency continued to implement its humanitarian and development programmes to the tangible benefit of Palestine refugees. The Agency had provided education services to half a million refugee children and had undertaken various youth empowerment initiatives, such as vocational training programmes. Recalling that such initiatives had a documented positive multiplier effect, she said that it was imperative for donors to continue to support special youth programmes regardless of financial constraints or shifting priorities. She would welcome additional information on current and any forthcoming UNRWA youth empowerment initiatives.

19. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that the Agency was grateful to Turkey for its contribution to the endowment fund that it was in the process of setting up with the Islamic Development Bank. The leadership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation fully supported the establishment of the fund, which would serve as a specific, stand-alone funding mechanism to assist Palestine refugees, and he called on members of that Organization to lend political support to the fund so that it could begin operating as soon as possible. However, the Agency was still in need of a lead donor for the trust fund that it was in the process of setting up with the World Bank. Once a lead donor had been identified, the process could move forward. He urged the Agency's existing partners or, indeed, any potential new partners, to consider assuming that role.

20. The question of whether the Agency should make explicit reference to Hamas in its reports was a long-standing point of discussion with Israel. While the Agency had publicly condemned Hamas upon discovering the existence of the tunnels under two of its schools, it was true that the press statement issued after the fact had not referred to the organization by name. However, that decision was not tantamount to the Agency failing to recognize the responsibility of Hamas or to condemn its actions. On the contrary, it had not hesitated to condemn Hamas for having jeopardized the safety and security of the staff and students and for having breached the inviolability of United Nations premises, and it would not hesitate to condemn similar violations by Hamas or another actor in the future. The fragility of the Agency's working environment required it to draft its communications in a certain manner and, on occasion, it was more prudent not to mention the perpetrator of a specific act by name.

21. While the Agency was open to receiving information pointing to a breach of the principle of neutrality by its staff, it would never act on information received from one stakeholder alone without first conducting an independent investigation. Upon receiving allegations of the appointment to the Hamas political bureau of two UNRWA staff members, the Agency had conducted a swift and thorough investigation and had decided to dismiss the staff members in question. The Agency was prepared to take any measures necessary to safeguard its integrity.

22. It was merely a factual observation that the stringency of the monitoring procedures in place in the

Gaza Strip both impeded the timely delivery of dual-use items and generated additional costs for the Agency, and such procedures had already cost the Agency more than $6 million. Multiple actors were indeed operating in the Gaza Strip and he had singled out Israeli monitoring procedures only because they had a direct impact on the Agency's activities. While he understood that there were legitimate security concerns associated with the movement of people and goods from the Gaza Strip into Israel and that Israel reserved the right to deny entry to its national territory, all actors were required under international humanitarian law to ensure that domestic security measures were compatible with the obligation to protect civilians in situations of armed conflict. The restrictions on freedom of movement between the Gaza Strip and Israel constituted a form of collective punishment, given that they frequently prevented Gazans from obtaining medical treatment in Israel. The Agency would continue to engage in a dialogue with Israel on that subject.

23. The process of formulating the medium-term strategy for the period 2016–2021 had constituted a challenge in its own right on account of the need to hold two years of extensive consultations with the members of the UNRWA Advisory Commission to secure its adoption. The greatest obstacle to its effective implementation was the uncertainty over whether sufficient funding would be available for its entire duration. Moreover, financial uncertainty precluded the possibility of strategic planning and could lead to the suspension of core services. Implementing new policies on the ground could also prove challenging owing to the Palestine refugee community's sensitivity to change, which was attributable to the precariousness and unpredictability of the environment in which they lived. The security risk management department had been established to protect the rights of Palestine refugees and was gradually rolling out protection procedures in the field. Universal literacy had been attained among the Palestine refugee population, a particularly remarkable achievement given the adverse conditions in which Palestine refugees lived.

24. The situation in the Gaza Strip was deteriorating owing to the ongoing Israeli blockade, which was steadily impoverishing the territory and forcing an increasing number of families to request food assistance from UNRWA. The blockade had wiped out entire sectors of the Gazan economy, as businesses could no longer export to Israel, the West Bank or further afield, and had left families unable to meet their basic needs. The socioeconomic conditions in the Gaza Strip were not conducive to addressing the security concerns of any of the actors involved or to resolving the conflict. A further cause for concern was the epidemic spread of psychosocial problems among Palestine refugees in the Gaza Strip, which could only be addressed through a political solution to the conflict. Failure to broker such a solution would accelerate the decline in the psychosocial well-being of the population of the Gaza Strip and further undermine safety and security in the region.

25. UNRWA continued to empower young Palestine refugees through the school parliament initiative, whereby students were elected to represent their peers in parliaments at the local, regional and central levels. The Agency was about to establish the first ever Agency-wide school parliament. Members of school parliaments had shown themselves to be engaged members of the community, having facilitated the return to education of students who had dropped out of school on account of conflict-related trauma. In summer 2017, the Agency had organized an exchange between students living in the Gaza Strip and students living in the West Bank with the aim of broadening their understanding of the situation in each of their respective territories. The Agency recognized that young people had an important role to play in promoting peace and stability in the region and would continue its efforts to empower them.

26. **Mr. González** (Nicaragua) asked how the Agency's work contributed to the commitments made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants to protect human rights and achieve sustainable development for all.

27. **Ms. Mohd Taib** (Malaysia) wondered what the Agency was doing to mitigate the impact of regional volatility and poverty on Palestine refugees, including children and the young, and to maintain their resilience, particularly in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

28. **Ms. Hamad** (Bahrain) asked how UNRWA managed to fulfil its mandate to support Palestine refugees, including Bedouin populations, in spite of the many obstacles to its work, including access restrictions. In the light of such obstacles, her delegation wondered whether there were alternative paths to fulfilling the Agency's mandate more effectively.

29. **Mr. Arcia Vivas** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that his delegation vehemently rejected the inhumane blockade of the Gaza Strip and wondered how the Agency's work was affected by the occupying Power's reprehensible imposition of collective punishment. It requested additional information on the economic, social and humanitarian situation in Gaza and wondered which aspects of the blockade's impact had been most devastating. Lastly, he asked whether any

donor countries had attached any conditions to their contributions.

30. **Mr. Zambrano Ortiz** (Ecuador) said that his delegation would welcome detailed information on the Agency's strategic plan and forecast for 2018 given that it was facing a critical funding shortfall. It wondered how the Agency would prevent the shortfall from affecting its vital work.

31. **Mr. Maleki** (Islamic Republic of Iran) recalled that a General Assembly resolution had called for the increase in funding needed for the Agency's work to come from the Organization's regular budget, given that voluntary contributions were not enough to ensure sufficient, predictable and sustained funding of the Agency's activities. His delegation wondered whether any progress had been made in that regard and also wished to know how the Agency's current budget compared to its budget five or ten years before.

32. **Mr. Elshandawily** (Egypt) asked whether the Agency would save money in the long term if the funding it received was predictable. If so, those parties that constantly called on it to save as much as possible might be well advised to work to ensure a greater degree of predictability in the Agency's funding.

33. **Ms. Meitzad** (Israel) said that it was regrettable that most of her questions remained unanswered. She hoped that the Commissioner-General's remarks on the Agency's various considerations when deciding whether to condemn a particular party's actions did not imply any sort of comparison between Israel and the terrorist organization Hamas. On a matter as straightforward as the digging of a terror tunnel underneath an UNRWA school, it was hard to understand what considerations could possibly exist apart from that of protecting the Agency's staff, the Israeli people and, of course, the people of Gaza.

34. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) said that, as the only major United Nations agency with a regional mandate, UNRWA must align its efforts with the Organization's global agenda as it was debated and defined at Headquarters. Several of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those relating to education and health, overlapped with key elements of the Agency's work, and he was working with colleagues at Headquarters to establish the interface between the UNRWA medium-term strategy for 2016–2021 and the Goals. He had also followed closely the work undertaken following the adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.

35. Bolstering the self-reliance of Palestine refugees in critical environments presented a formidable challenge. In each context, the specific circumstances determined people's capacity for self-reliance and must therefore be analysed in order to provide Palestine refugees with adequate support. However, such factors as violence and occupation were not within the Agency's control. The situation of Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic vividly illustrated what they had lost as a result of the conflict in that country. Prior to its onset in 2011, Palestine refugees living in that country had largely been able to cover the basic needs of their families because they had had access to employment. As a result, the number of beneficiaries of UNRWA services in the Syrian Arab Republic had been fairly low when compared to other communities in the region. Currently, 95 per cent of Palestine refugees in that country depended on UNRWA aid. In areas where conflict had subsided and Palestine refugees had returned to the camp environments they had previously inhabited and later fled, there was a basis for them to become economically engaged instead of only receiving assistance. By contrast, in Lebanon, a high percentage of Palestine refugees lacked access to work, resulting in alarming poverty levels.

36. Implementation of the Agency's mandate was indeed made more difficult by access restrictions and it encountered problems in reaching approximately 30,000 of the 440,000 Palestine refugees needing assistance in the Syrian Arab Republic. However, the Agency's long-standing, well-established presence and experience in the country enabled it to respond more effectively to crisis situations. The Agency's large presence in Gaza, encompassing over 12,000 staff and a large number of clinics and schools, provided tremendous added value for the international community. In moments of conflict, the inevitable increase in access restrictions and the actions taken by parties posed a challenge to continued operation. With regard to tunnels that could affect operations and security and compromise the credibility of institutions, UNRWA had put in place significant, sophisticated procedures involving communication with the Palestinian Authority and Israel on how to import materials. The existing arrangements were robust and well-tested but entailed additional costs and procedures. The Israeli military had confirmed on numerous occasions that no UNRWA materials had been diverted for other purposes, indicating the seriousness with which the Agency approached its security arrangements.

37. In terms of funding, the Agency maintained a good relationship with the donor community. It expected the $715 million that it was projected to spend that year on health care, relief and social services and other core activities to consist of unearmarked contributions that could be used freely and actively to respond to those

particular needs, whereas emergency appeals tended to involve specific conditions. The Agency would not allow the shortfall projected for 2017 to grow and, for that reason, the pursuit of additional funding was of crucial importance. The reforms and cost-containing measures implemented over the previous two years had contributed to improving the Agency's financial stability, but donor countries were encouraged to consider multi-year funding arrangements. Donors should bear in mind that the almost State-like services that UNRWA was required to provide on an ever-increasing scale placed enormous pressure on the Agency to achieve greater financial stability in the coming years.

38. The Secretary-General's proposals for stabilizing the Agency's financial situation included diversifying the voluntary contributions of Member States. UNRWA annual reports dating back six decades revealed a more diverse group of donor countries, with far more contributions to the Agency by Asian, Latin American and African States than at present. It was therefore crucial to explore those avenues further. Consideration of how to implement the General Assembly resolution calling for assessed contributions to the UNRWA budget was under way, but Member States had not reached full agreement on the viability of that option; in any event, deriving funding from assessed contributions would never suffice as a stand-alone measure. The Agency's current ability to use funding from the programme budget pertained only to international staff. Further reflection was needed on the possibility of extending the use of that funding beyond international staff, in line with the practice of other United Nations agencies.

39. It would be highly surprising for the Agency to receive fully sufficient funding, and humanitarian organizations were very rarely in situations of financial comfort, given the great burden borne by an international community made up of countries either in crisis themselves or working to respond to crises in other parts of the world. For its part, UNRWA focused on the community it was mandated to serve, and it took that mandate, which had been conferred and renewed by an overwhelming majority of Member States, very seriously. The Agency's mandate was not for sale.

40. Sustained, predictable funding would afford UNRWA strategic sustainability, not comfort, which would enable it to address humanitarian needs and improve the stability of refugee communities. Moreover, building the Agency's operational reserves, which had been depleted years earlier, was critical, given that its operations serving 5.3 million people would be forced to shut down within hours if funding was withdrawn. Ultimately, the ideal solution to the Palestine refugee question was not a perfectly funded UNRWA but instead a political solution. At present, the unpredictability of the Agency's financial situation gave rise to a high-risk scenario. Any resources saved would serve to replenish the Agency's operational reserves, which could then be drawn upon in critical shortfall moments, so as to avoid reliance on repeated urgent appeals to donors. The graduation of more than two million Palestine refugee graduates from UNRWA schools, thanks to donor support, amounted to one of the greatest contributions to human development in the Middle East and underscored the importance of continued investment in the Agency's efforts.

41. With regard to the comments made by the representative of Israel, he said that reflecting on how and when a press statement should be made was a clear political consideration involving reputational issues and clarity of message. UNRWA had openly condemned as unacceptable the activities by Hamas involving an Agency school. It was not his role to draw comparisons when referring to the parties to conflicts and he had never done so. However, one of the unique features of international humanitarian law was that it had been designed in such a way as to impose obligations on all parties equally, without engendering recognition of a given actor or establishing a moral equivalence between actors. Whenever those obligations were violated, he would continue, without any hesitation, to denounce such violations, regardless of the identity of the perpetrator. His factual observations were not political in nature but rather informed by the universal applicability of international humanitarian law. By documenting the actions of all parties, the Agency was not drawing any comparisons between actors but merely applying the rules of international humanitarian law in the most consistent manner possible. He would be glad to engage in further dialogue on the matter with representatives from the Permanent Mission of Israel in New York.

Statement by the Rapporteur of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA

42. **Mr. Halvorsen** (Norway), introducing the report of the Working Group (A/72/326), said that the report described the Agency's progress on key reforms and strategies and outlined its funding needs and expenditure within the humanitarian, social and political contexts in its fields of operations, all of which were affected, to varying degrees, by the current unrest in the Middle East. The Working Group was seriously concerned at the Agency's dire financial situation and its shortfall of $77.5 million. Several donors had provided additional contributions and the Agency had

implemented measures to improve the cost effectiveness of its programmes even further, but there was still a gap to bridge. The General Assembly and the international community were responsible for ensuring that the Agency could fulfil its mandate and maintain its services at an acceptable level. Concerned at the multiplication of crises and their impact on the Agency's operations and funding, the Working Group urged all Governments to increase their contributions to the Agency, in particular to its programme budget, and to sustain those contributions over several years. Government contributions should keep pace with the requirement for the Agency to meet the growing needs of the Palestine refugee population and should take into account the effects of inflation and other factors driving the costs of providing services.

43. The Working Group commended UNRWA for the measures it had taken to increase its efficiency while maintaining the quality of its services to Palestine refugees. It noted the recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General on the operations of UNRWA (A/71/849) and all resolutions relating to the financing of the Agency with a view to addressing recurring budget deficits and sufficiently supporting the Agency's vital work. The Working Group invited all Member States to consider those recommendations when assessing the possibility of funding UNRWA in 2017 and beyond. The Agency had made progress in its efforts to contain its costs and the Working Group encouraged Member States to accompany those measures with adequate funding for UNRWA as it continued to serve more than 5 million Palestine refugees in the Middle East.

General debate

44. **Ms. Abdelhady-Nasser** (Observer for the State of Palestine) said that it was remarkable that UNRWA had been able to carry out its humanitarian work in support of Palestine refugees for nearly seven decades against a backdrop of crises, instability and socioeconomic deterioration that had compounded the plight of the refugees and increased the demands on the Agency. The lack of a political horizon undermined donor enthusiasm and resource mobilization, making it more difficult to close the funding gap each year and meet growing refugee needs. The Agency had a skilled workforce of over 30,000 staff, the majority of whom were refugees themselves and members of the communities they served. Those refugees carried out their work with dedication and dignity, despite operational challenges, personal hardship and the regrettable fact that they remained the only United Nations staff in the area not to receive hazard pay. However, the longevity of the Agency's assistance to the Palestine refugees had only been possible thanks to the cooperation and support of donor and host countries.

45. The international community's support for the Agency's mandate reflected the fact that it remained a cornerstone of the Organization's permanent responsibility towards the question of Palestine until it had been justly resolved in all its aspects and the rights of the Palestinian people, including the Palestine refugees, had been fulfilled in accordance with international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions, including General Assembly resolutions 194 (III) and 302 (IV). Fifty years of Israeli occupation had inflicted immeasurable loss and suffering on the Palestinian people, precluded peace in the region, stained the international conscience and undermined international law and the credibility of international institutions, and it was clear that neither sympathetic words nor humanitarian aid could suffice. Only a solution that rectified those injustices and restored long-denied rights to the Palestinian people could close the current dark chapter in history and finally achieve Palestinian-Israeli peace, which was the key to peace and security in the Middle East and beyond.

46. The persistent, virulent denial by Israel of the rights of the Palestine refugees, including to return to live at peace with their neighbours and to compensation for their losses, had forced generations to endure long years of exile, dispossession, deprivation and cycles of violent conflict and displacement. At present, more than 5.3 million Palestine refugees were registered with UNRWA in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Occupied Palestine, including East Jerusalem, and millions of them still lived in the refugee camps established in 1948. While the Agency's education, health, relief and protection programmes were of immense benefit to Palestine refugees, hopelessness and despair were widespread as they faced harsh realities and the continued absence of a just, durable solution. The entire population of the Gaza Strip had endured the devastation of the Israeli blockade, military aggressions and occupation. Under the pressure of an ever-worsening humanitarian situation, coping capacities had been severely depleted, as had the hopes and dreams of an entire generation of youth.

47. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the refugee community, particularly Bedouins, were enduring the brutalities of the Israeli occupation and its coercive and punitive measures. In Syria, Palestine refugees, alongside the rest of the civilian population, had suffered acutely from the conflict there and had endured further displacement and fragile humanitarian conditions. In Lebanon, Palestine refugees who had fled

from Syria continued to struggle with abject poverty, marginalization, lack of opportunity and instability. Even in Jordan, where the situation was the most stable, negative socioeconomic conditions disproportionately affected the refugee population. Only a just solution to the Palestine refugee question could bring an end to their tragedy. In the meantime, the Agency's support remained a lifeline.

48. Recalling the commitment made by the international community in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants to actively promote lasting solutions, particularly in protracted refugee situations, with a focus on sustainable and timely return in safety and dignity, she said that the Palestine refugees could not remain the exception to such universal pledges. Moreover, armed conflict, including foreign occupation, in no way negated the applicability of international law, the obligations of which were clear and binding. The Charter of the United Nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention, core human rights covenants and all relevant resolutions must be fully respected, and protection of civilians and humanitarian access must be ensured at all times. Her delegation condemned all actions that undermined or endangered the safety and neutrality of UNRWA staff and the security of its facilities, and insisted on accountability for all such violations, particularly for those perpetrated by Israel during its military aggression against Gaza in 2014.

49. Given the Agency's significant shortfall, it was regrettable that one delegation maintained its staunch opposition to any action relating to a larger regular budget allocation to the Agency, despite the Secretary-General's recommendation to explore all potential ways and means, including voluntary and assessed contributions, to ensure more sufficient, predictable and sustained funding to UNRWA. Efforts were being pursued with concerned partners to implement the Secretary-General's other recommendations and it was hoped that those proposals would receive the strong support of delegations and would mobilize more support for UNRWA, which was urgently needed. Regarding partnerships with international financial institutions, her delegation supported the initial steps taken with the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, and welcomed the efforts of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to enhance financial predictability by establishing a fund for Palestine refugees, with UNRWA as implementing partner. Her delegation recognized the Agency's own efforts to mobilize resources, institute reforms, contain costs and maximize efficiency while preserving and, where possible, improving the quality of services provided to refugees, with the limited funding available.

50. Too often, the political will to do right was absent and that had been the case for the question of Palestine for over seven decades. The international community must not forgo its responsibilities to alleviate the hardship of the Palestinian people and contribute to their human development, while ensuring that no one was left behind and providing a modicum of stability during the search for a just solution. Support to UNRWA therefore remained crucial. Palestine called on the international community to mobilize the political will and action necessary to bring an end to the injustice from which the Palestinian people suffered and to achieve a just, lasting, comprehensive and peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine, including a just solution for the Palestine refugees.

51. **Mr. Suárez-Moreno** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), speaking on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, said that the Movement firmly supported the Agency and its mandate. More than 5 million Palestine refugees sought a just solution to their plight, on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions, including General Assembly resolution 194 (III) which affirmed, among other rights, their right of return and to just compensation. The upcoming seventieth anniversary of the partition of Mandate Palestine by the General Assembly and the ensuing 1948 Palestinian exodus was a reminder that it was long past time to reach a just, lasting, comprehensive and peaceful solution to the question of Palestine as a whole.

52. The Movement was seriously concerned at recent developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, particularly the unprecedented rise in forced displacements, widespread settler violence, the escalation in demolitions of both homes and economic assets, and other illegal policies and measures implemented by Israel, the occupying Power, which were intended to expand its illegal settlement campaign and consolidate its occupation of Palestinian land. Those practices, along with the West Bank wall and other restrictions on movement, continued to have a negative impact on the living conditions and well-being of the civilian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

53. The crisis in Gaza must be approached in a comprehensive manner, in compliance with international law and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, as part of efforts to end the illegitimate Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, since 1967. The illegal blockade of Gaza should be lifted immediately, which was the only way for the Palestine refugees in Gaza to reduce their dependence on UNRWA.

54. The Movement remained seriously concerned at the Agency's persistent funding shortfall as it undermined its efforts to promote human development, meet the basic needs of the Palestine refugees and fulfil its humanitarian mission without interruption. In that regard, it regretted the inability of the General Assembly to follow up on the recommendations made in the report of the Secretary-General on the operations of UNRWA (A/71/849), pursuant to General Assembly resolution 71/93, with a view to ensuring more sufficient, predictable and sustainable funding. Notwithstanding, the Movement hoped that Member States would support the relevant provisions in that regard in the draft resolution on the operations of UNRWA (A/C.4/72/L.19) in order to alleviate the difficult situation of the Palestine refugees in the absence of a just solution.

55. **Mr. Chatzisavas** (Observer for the European Union), speaking also on behalf of the candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and the stabilization and association process country Bosnia and Herzegovina, said that the European Union remained the largest provider of international aid to Palestine refugees. Much of that funding was granted through multi-year financing or was flexible and not earmarked. Despite sustained financial contributions from the European Union and from other committed donors, UNRWA was facing a shortfall of $77 million, which was threatening the continuity of its core services provided to Palestine refugees.

56. Although the Agency's efforts to counter the shortfall and contain its impact deserved recognition and support, further efforts to improve cost efficiency and prioritize the delivery of core services to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees were needed urgently. That would require more operational and financial planning, taking into account changing operational contexts in the field and aligning the Agency's assistance with the needs of host countries, which had been facing an increasingly difficult regional context.

57. The European Union welcomed the outcomes of the consultative process conducted during the seventy-first session, as well as the Secretary-General's conclusions and his recommendations to achieve sufficient, sustained and predictable funding for UNRWA. Further discussions were needed on how to secure financial sustainability for the Agency. The European Union noted the Agency's intensified efforts to mobilize resources, such as the high-level meeting held in September 2016 on sustainable funding for the Agency, which Jordan and Sweden had hosted. The financial burden must be shared more widely among all, including regional donors, and financing must become more flexible, in line with the Grand Bargain on humanitarian financing. The European Union remained committed to supporting the Agency's work until a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to conflict had been reached.

58. **Mr. Al-Malki** (Qatar) said that his country had consistently provided humanitarian support for the Palestinian people and had pledged $1 billion at the 2014 Cairo International Conference on Palestine: Reconstructing Gaza. The recent conclusion of a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas and the establishment of a Palestinian national unity Government in Gaza heralded a new dawn of unity and friendship for the Palestinian people.

59. The services delivered by UNRWA provided Palestine refugees with a bare minimum of health care, education, food, shelter, social services and protection in the face of continued occupation and the siege imposed on Gaza. The Agency would retain its vital role until the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict had reached a final settlement that included the right of return in accordance with international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions, including General Assembly resolution 194 (III). However, the chronic funding gaps in the Agency's budget were adversely affecting its delivery of core services in all fields of operation. It was therefore necessary to secure sustainable funding for UNRWA and optimize the use of available resources. His Government had contributed $1 million to the Agency's programme budget in 2016 and would continue to support the work of UNRWA and champion the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

60. **Ms. Sughayar** (Jordan) said that the chronic shortfall faced by UNRWA put the continuity of its core services at risk every year, which threatened the stability and well-being of Palestine refugees. The Agency's humanitarian role should not be hindered by interruptions in financing, nor should it be politicized. The international community should shoulder the burden with UNRWA and the host countries in order to provide the necessary services for Palestine refugees, particularly education and health care. Member States had a collective responsibility to build on the broad consultations conducted by Turkey and Switzerland in 2017, as well as to seriously consider the Secretary-General's recommendations and work on translating them into action by exploring all funding options, including increased assessed contributions from the regular budget of the United Nations. Donor countries were strongly encouraged to increase their voluntary contributions and to commit to making them on a

multi-year basis. The Agency's donor base should be expanded to include traditional and non-traditional donors from different geographic regions in order to ensure predictable, sustained and sufficient funding.

61. As the largest host of Palestine refugees, Jordan remained committed to protecting those refugees while assuming its share of the responsibility for supporting UNRWA. In furtherance of those efforts, Jordan had recently sponsored a high-level meeting aimed at identifying means to support the Agency, with an emphasis on establishing new funding mechanisms through regional and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Taking into account that those mechanisms were not meant to replace voluntary contributions or existing mechanisms, Jordan would follow up on the establishment of a fund for Palestine refugees administered by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, once the Islamic Development Bank had prepared a study for that purpose.

62. Her Government supported the Commissioner-General's efforts to address the chronic shortfall faced by UNRWA, including through internal austerity measures and other reforms. The Agency was a pillar of stability for more than 5 million Palestine refugees and must be provided with the funds needed to provide services to them. Any lack of funding or interruption of services would not only have a tremendous impact on the refugees themselves but would also considerably affect the host countries. Ensuring predictable, sustained and reliable financial support for UNRWA would not only guarantee the sustainability, consistency and quality of the services provided to Palestine refugees but would also contribute significantly to the stability of the region.

63. **Mr. Plasai** (Thailand) said that the challenges facing Palestine refugees remained a grave concern for the international community. UNRWA needed adequate, timely and predictable resources in order to carry out its mandate in a sustainable manner for the Palestine refugees. The failure to reach an agreement on the draft resolution on UNRWA (A/71/L.79) had aggravated an already difficult financial situation. Member States had begun their journey toward realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with a promise not to leave anyone behind. With that in mind, the situation of the Palestinian people could not be ignored or neglected. Member States should therefore ensure reliable funding of UNRWA so that it could continue its humanitarian work in the best possible conditions.

64. Humanitarian assistance and human development were among the core principles of his Government's foreign policy, and it had consistently made financial contributions to UNRWA since 1978. In 2014, Thailand had responded to the appeal to help those affected by the devastating impacts of the conflict in the Gaza Strip. It would continue to fulfil its commitment to make significant contributions to the Agency over a four-year term, which it hoped would help improve the predictability of funding. It would also continue doing its part to mitigate the adversity that Palestine refugees faced, and would lend full support to any international efforts to reach a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and bring about lasting peace in the Middle East.

65. **Mr. Maleki** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that his delegation supported the Commissioner-General in his tireless efforts to mobilize the resources required to sustain the Agency's operations in all fields of operation and commended UNRWA staff for their courage, bravery and dedication in serving the Palestine refugees under difficult and often dangerous circumstances, which had cost some of them their lives while in the line of duty. The Islamic Republic of Iran was seriously concerned at the critical situation of the Palestine refugees and attached great importance to the role of UNRWA in providing humanitarian assistance to more than 5 million Palestine refugees. The Agency's mandate was essential and must be continued until the plight of the refugees had been brought to an end in a just manner.

66. His delegation was concerned at the worsening situation of the Palestine refugees due to the ongoing occupation and blockade that adversely affected all aspects of their daily lives, from security and freedom of movement to livelihoods and employment. The illegal and inhumane blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel had entered into its second decade and must be lifted immediately and unconditionally. It was incumbent upon the international community, and the United Nations in particular, to uphold its moral, political and legal responsibilities to take due measures to put an end to occupation in Palestine and compel the occupying Power to cease all forms of violence against the Palestinian people.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.